

Jean Dong

Chinese Statecraft in a Changing World

Demystifying Enduring Traditions and
Dynamic Constraints

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Foreword

We live in an era in which breathless commentary on the likelihood of war with China has become commonplace. Driven by the self-interest of politicians chasing votes, national security specialists seeking relevance, and newspapers pursuing readers, this mounting drumbeat threatens to become a risk to our national security in its own right. As the origins of the First World War graphically demonstrate, the emergence of a belligerent mindset—and all the misinterpretations and miscalculations that typically accompany it—is often the precursor to tragic and avoidable conflict.

Of even greater concern is the fact that this belligerence is often accompanied by profound ignorance of Chinese people, geography, history, and culture. This widespread lack of curiosity about this ancient civilisation that is now seen by some as an existential threat is profoundly disturbing.

I sincerely hope that Australian and Western opinion-leaders read this book. Jean Dong sets out a thorough and dispassionate explanation of the broad contours of Chinese history, specifically targeted at a Western audience. As she shows, there are consistent patterns in Chinese strategic conduct stretching back many centuries, shaped in particular by the implications of geography, that are still highly relevant today. Through detailed analysis of issues such as the long-standing Chinese desire for friendly states on its borders and the impact of China's two major river systems on its economic and political development, Dong provides us with lenses through which the preoccupations of contemporary China can be more clearly understood. And the conclusion that a balanced and fair-minded reader will draw is this: while the dramatic return of China to the pre-eminence it enjoyed in the pre-industrial era inevitably brings with it serious international stresses and tensions, there is no reason to conclude that this makes outright military conflict with the West inevitable or even likely.

So what does China want? Contemporary Western commentary is very threadbare on this question. Although there are numerous answers to this question, all of which need to be weighed up accordingly, in my view there is one theme that is central: China wants to be treated seriously.

Presumptions of Western dominance in global affairs are so deeply embedded in our discourse that we hardly notice them. But after almost two centuries of Western

brutality, bullying, and condescension, the Chinese certainly do. Few Australians would be able to give a thorough explanation of the Century of Humiliation, but the savage indignities imposed on a weakened China by an economically and technologically dominant West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have not been forgotten by the Chinese. Western assumptions of hegemony and superiority became so dominant that in the early 1950s the major American political parties squabbled over ‘who lost China?’—as if the most populous nation on earth were a suitcase absent-mindedly left at a railway station.

Understanding China does not mean we have to agree with it, or avoid standing up to it. Australia has been right to resist attempts to expand Chinese power in the South Pacific and influence domestic Australian politics, for example. Understanding China means we will be infinitely better prepared to navigate our way through the challenges that inevitably accompany the astonishing rise of Chinese economic and military strength.

Many regard German belligerence as the primary cause of the First World War, without even stopping to ask why the Germans were belligerent. The extent of German belligerence relative to the behaviour of other European powers remains a matter of vigorous debate, but examination of the reasons Germany was willing to go to war is revealing. Fear of a rapidly industrialising Russia that had three times its population, and whose industrial and military expansion was in part financed by the French who were eager to regain Alsace-Lorraine that had been ceded after defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, was a critical factor. The inability of Germany to access adequate food and mineral resources that internal and external colonies delivered in vast quantities to competitor nations like Britain, France, Russia, and the United States was also central. Sadly no political leaders of the time sought to deal with these issues in a way that would diminish the risk of outright military conflict. And once that conflict started, it proved impossible to halt or constrain.

If today’s Western leaders believe that China is set on a path that makes major war unavoidable, they have a responsibility to seek to understand why, and develop strategies designed to divert China down a different path. While military deterrence has a role to play in this process, it is a very blunt, risky, costly, and inflexible approach to rely entirely on. Failure to understand China and its aspirations means the risk of drifting into the kind of zero-sum confrontation that triggered the First World War becomes much more likely.

In a dispassionate, balanced, and scholarly contribution, Jean Dong has provided us with an excellent means through which to tackle the challenge of understanding China. Those who study international affairs—and particularly those who shape them—should study this text carefully. If we are to avoid the tragic miscalculations of the past, a clearer understanding of China is absolutely essential.

Melbourne, Australia

Lindsay Tanner
Australian Minister for Finance
2007–2010

Preface

What This Book Is About

Humanity is currently navigating an era of continuous and interconnected disruption, often described as a ‘polycrisis’. We find ourselves continuously exposed to warnings that the world is not only a dangerous place, but teetering on the brink of collapse. A permanent sense of crisis has become the ‘new normal’.

The list of most commonly addressed challenges goes something like this. There is the accelerating drumbeat of extreme weather events and contested battle over critical resources. There is the deep societal transformations arising from the rapid advancement of technology and artificial intelligence, including their applications to cyber and armed weaponry. There is the intensified geopolitical landscape with its escalated risks of conflicts and wars. And there is the amplified frustrations around inequality, which have fuelled the rise of populism, nationalism, extremism, and terrorism on a global scale.

Against this tumultuous landscape, China’s rising economic influence and military expansion add a layer of complexity, amplifying the fragility of our interconnected world and challenging existing global norms. A critical question, of course, is whether ‘the China challenge’ is to be understood primarily as another disruptive threat endangering precious global norms, or whether—in a historical moment of global reinvention—China could be a positive game-changer for the world. And if the latter, what could be done to amplify this role.

One thing at least is clear: in spite of the unparalleled challenges that China has brought to the global stage, the nation is not fading from the scene. As such, a proactive approach is essential to deal with China’s influence effectively. This applies irrespective of the reader’s attitude towards China. It is, in fact, all the more important as China is perceived as a potential adversary. Indeed, the first principle of developing strategies and policies towards nations perceived as potential rivals is to grasp the underlying motives behind their actions. This is not about acquiescing to their stance, but being adequately prepared to develop an effective approach in dealing with them.

This book aims to facilitate this objective by unpacking the underlying logic behind China's policy-making and how it has contributed to the shape and content of the country's global ambitions. For this, the book focuses on examining the 'why' beyond the 'what', enabling new questions to be asked about 'how' to deal with China. More specifically, what can be done for China to become a more constructive and accountable participant in the emergence of a prosperous shared world. In this regard, arguably, this book is not just about China or understanding China per se, but forging solutions for common global challenges and avoiding the most catastrophic forms of war—all the while fully acknowledging China's disruptive and problematic violations of global norms and universal categories, as well as its inevitable influence on almost every global issue.

The main contribution of this book is presenting a novel perspective to identify realistic and practical possibilities to increase strategic options, exert influence and effect changes regarding China. I propose to call it 'Dynamic Constraints Analysis'. The approach involves articulating the constraints and flexibility facing Chinese decision-making. By 'constraints', I refer to the enduring structural limitations derived from China's geography and long history that curb China's actions, thereby compelling it to make trade-offs. By contrast, 'flexibility' refers to those elements in China's tradition and material conditions that enable more open-ended decision-making.

As an illustration of constraints, consider China's geographically intricate and occasionally antagonistic borders. These conditions have prompted the nation's search for strategic security, represented by large-scale investment in the modernisation of its military force. Concurrently, contingencies among neighbouring countries could pose significant threats to China's land borders, potentially drawing it into prolonged and costly land-based commitments. Over China's long history, this situation has consistently forced it to make a trade-off between landward security and maritime ambition, a constraint that still largely applies today.

Additionally, China's persistent food security issues, derived from its geographical characteristics, led to a form of 'performance legitimacy' intrinsically linked to economic growth and material welfare. China's primary interest in pursuing economic security and prosperity through growth could result in alterations to market regulations in its own favour or the unilateral dominance of sea lanes. Nonetheless, maintaining economic-driven legitimacy also obliges Chinese policy-makers to uphold the country's position in the global trade system. This necessitates that China strikes a balance between an aggressive stance and functioning as a responsible participant on the global stage.

Although Beijing's vision for China's rise is ambitious, its grand strategy is not just a long list of heterogeneous goals, but a clearly ordered list, with priorities and trade-offs defined by a range of enduring constraints. However, such constraints do not necessitate an unchanging and static approach to global strategy. Instead, they guide tactical and strategic dynamics as circumstances require. Understanding these dynamic flexibilities within the system can broaden the range of strategic choices, expanding the set of potential actions, and thus providing a route to regain control and influence.

To give one example of flexibility, China has been characterised by enduring centralised power, yet there has been a continuous power dynamic between central and local governments. Flexible local implementation across government levels, from provincial to township, enables the piloting of new projects or the formation of counter-powers to influence the central government. This is achieved through spillover effects to other provinces, by generating local ‘know-how’, and/or by fostering a bottom-up approach to impact the central level. Furthermore, concerning China’s highly centralised and opaque decision-making processes, there is an opportunity to influence decisions by offering inputs on the details of implementation. This is because Chinese standard practice typically involves making relatively broad policy decisions initially, with specific details to be refined at the implementation stage through a range of consultative processes.

The application of ‘Dynamic Constraints Analysis’ serves a dual purpose. First, it aims to equip readers with a tool to distinguish between ‘imaginary fears’—perceived threats that China poses stemming from its statements or actions—and ‘legitimate fears’—genuine challenges that China’s rise presents to our collective future, driven by its core interests. By highlighting the constraints in China’s actions, this approach helps in conceptualising imagined fears more constructively while concentrating on addressing real challenges. Second, this analysis seeks to aid readers in realistically evaluating strategic options and alternatives by highlighting the enduring components of China’s decision-making and inherent flexibility at play. As a result, readers can more effectively assess the feasibility and potential for success of actionable steps.

It should be acknowledged that the approach articulated above is not exceedingly ambitious or bold. Rather, it is largely about the art of ‘doing small things’. This reflects an attempt at finding the right balance. In our age of global fragility and interlinked human security threats, we need a bold agenda to match the magnitude of the challenges at stake. Yet we must also remain humble in the face of the unknown. In a context of radical uncertainty, we should tread carefully, and take considered steps to manage the current transition phase.

This book was written to serve as a tool for sense-making, not persuasion. Rather than attempting to sway readers towards a positive or negative view of China, the book was designed to assist in comprehending the facts and discerning their relevance in a given context. Therefore, this book does not ask readers to accept China’s political system or values, nor does it make any predictions regarding China’s future actions or instruct readers to adopt a certain course of action. Its more modest but useful aim is to assist readers in developing their understanding, enhance their interpretative frameworks, and strengthen their capacity to deal with China effectively. Like China’s ancient oracle, the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, the book is here to help think about problems in a new manner by tapping into the human capacity to make sense of patterns. To this end, the book aspires to achieve three objectives.

Firstly, the book aims to help readers regain historical agency by broadening our understanding of the past, and thus inspiring more ways of imagining the future. While many valuable analyses on China are available, it is worth noting that some studies commonly focus on a relatively recent timeframe, starting with the Opium War or the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Solely relying on these

perspectives to comprehend the underlying logic behind Chinese policy-making is likely to result in incomplete understanding. Many answers, explanations and analogies are not to be found in the immediate past, but rather necessitate engaging with greater depths of history. For this reason, the book adopts a long historical timeframe (circa 2000 BCE to present). It specifically examines the dynamics of history as they relate to modern issues. This makes it possible to explore resonances between ancient and contemporary China, especially in terms of governance.

Secondly, this book seeks to illustrate the rich tapestry of global culture by drawing contrasts between the political, economic, and philosophical concepts of Chinese and Western contexts. Emphasising these differences is not a bid to establish a ranking of cultures, but rather to deepen our appreciation for the diverse and complex facets of our interconnected world. Our understandings of the present are profoundly shaped by our individual historical realities and the norms and values we hold. Consequently, we often interpret current events through the lens of our conventional grasp of history. This makes the exploration of diverse historical experiences and cultural contexts vital to bridging cognitive and emotional gaps between different cultures.

Thirdly, this book offers a practical interpretation of key narratives and theories, allowing readers to act upon those insights at their level and in their context. To this end, it consciously embraces a cross-disciplinary approach. The aim is to bring together many intersecting forms of knowledge, ranging from history to macroeconomics, geopolitics, philosophy, and beyond, providing a synthesis. This approach, as well as the wide range of contexts and concepts presented in the book, is a reflection of the intricate and diverse nature of China's own history, politics, and society.

Why I Wrote This Book

My main motivation for writing this book was observing many examples of miscalculation and misjudgement from the West in their interactions with China. On many occasions, those have led to undesired and undesirable results. I was able to follow much of this from the inside over the last decade, as I worked on high-level bilateral engagements between Australia and China, as well as multilateral diplomacy, with large corporations, government bodies, and think tanks.

Was the crisis that led to the First World War caused by German capabilities or German conduct? Henry Kissinger raises this question in his book *On China*. The underlying reference is the 1907 Crowe Memorandum, which influenced the confrontational British stance before the First World War. This Memorandum gives an unambiguous answer: namely, that when assessing the best stance to take when faced with a potential challenger, the decision should be based on its capabilities, not its conduct.

The question raised by Henry Kissinger applied to China then and remains relevant today. As China masters advanced military capabilities, those capabilities may well overshadow China's conduct. This means that the West's trust in Chinese leaders' formal assurance and Chinese policies could wane dangerously, leaving China's

military capacity as the only thing shaping the West's approach to China. In other words, we are at risk of seeing an escalation of military responses, in turn fuelling Beijing's assertiveness—a renewed arms race based on China's capabilities only, irrespective of its conduct.

This risk, combined with my personal observations of recurring misperceptions, prompted me to delve into Chinese statecraft, studying patterns and changes rooted in its extensive history and the resonances between ancient and contemporary China. In particular, I sought to identify the enduring geographical and historical constraints that have tempered China's ambitions and compelled it to make measured trade-offs. Such insights, if they were to be heard, could offer a more nuanced perspective, differentiating unwarranted anxieties from genuine concerns about China's influence, resulting in more targeted and effective strategies.

In our era of successive global challenges and pressing collaborative endeavours, dealing with China effectively offers an opportunity of great prosperity for all, while failure to engage productively may bring dire consequences. More importantly, the window of opportunity to engage and impact China effectively is narrowing.

China's assertiveness is often presented as a cause for concern—yet its vulnerability poses a significantly greater risk. A vulnerable China is a less cooperative and capable China, and one less willing and able to seek solutions for shared global challenges. At present, China is experiencing a prevailing sense of insecurity, originating from both internal and external sources. Beijing is increasingly convinced that, regardless of its actions, the United States and the West will perceive and interact with China unfavourably. Paradoxically, this heightened vulnerability may drive China to embrace a riskier stance, particularly in relation to Taiwan, as concerns over its global reputation and military posture recede.

If China were to take a turn towards a left-skewed, inward-looking or aggressive direction, it could take an entire generation to revert to a more positive course of action. Critical time for coordinated efforts to tackle existential challenges—environmental, social, and technological—would be lost in the process. This underscores the urgency to act promptly; seize the window of opportunity while it remains open; and explore innovative, multifaceted approaches to address the challenges presented by China. This sense of urgency has strengthened my commitment to search for practical measures to meet 'the China challenge' in a peaceful and constructive way and build greater understanding to increase the chances of this happening.

How I Wrote This Book

I offer this book with great humility, knowing that the future will inevitably unfold in ways that I have not foreseen. The question I constantly asked myself was 'how do I know if this is true or correct?'

Since I started undertaking the research in 2018, I have immersed myself in a wide range of studies and policy papers, and spoken to many figures in politics, business, and academia around the world. I travelled to Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, South

Korea, Saudi Arabia, and major European countries on work commitments and as part of my role as a taskforce member for the G20 think tank engagement group. During those trips, I visited numerous research institutions and think tanks to identify what issues they were most concerned about regarding China. I also engaged in many conversations and exchanges to draw criticism and feedback from people of various backgrounds, cultures, and positions on the ideas articulated in this book. The goal was to ensure that my analysis was real and objective, with minimal ideological or other bias.

In the second half of 2021, I invested in a six-month field research in China to stress-test my arguments. Over this period, I visited dozens of universities, think tanks, government departments, and companies and had discussions and debates with over one hundred Chinese representatives. I also visited rural villages to get a local view from ordinary citizens. My goal, again, was to understand the current dynamics of intellectual discourse in China with as broad a view as possible, including controversial debates on emerging topics. It was particularly important for me to write with first-hand information and direct experience, against the backdrop of poor information flows and limited person-to-person exchanges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This process of research taught me to be truly humble. My work builds on the significant academic achievements our society has enabled, in which I found great inspiration and freedom. Therefore, I didn't rush to initiate any new theories, but rather focused on articulating new perspectives from existing theories, striving towards making the presentation most useful to readers. In line with this aim, I chose to organise the book in three parts, as follows.

Part I of the book focuses on the fundamental factors that shaped China's logic of governance and decision-making. It applies historical, political, economic, and philosophical perspectives to provide a framework for identifying, conceptualising, and interpreting the core features of China's governance model. Part I aims to enhance comprehension of a rapidly changing China, specifically how its leaders think, make decisions, and act upon them.

Part II of the book focuses on the trajectories taken by a rising China and its impact on the world. It analyses China's military ambitions, particularly around hot spots like Taiwan and the South China Sea; how China is likely to exert its influence on a global level; and how Xi Jinping's vision, experience, and personality are shaping the direction of China's development. Part II particularly looks at the ongoing constraints that Chinese leaders face, and the trade-offs they have to make. It aims to provide a realistic assessment of the nature and scope of China's ambition and to identify potential leverage points that could expand strategic choices in dealing with China.

Part III of the book opens a discussion about China in an age of exponential change, and provokes the reader to adopt a cyclical view of history as a way to explore different solutions to 'the China challenge'. This final part proposes a possible way forward which calls for two key tasks to be handled simultaneously. One is managing the current period of transition and uncertainty, the other is imagining and building a new future by shifting the paradigm. For this, the book offers a reconceptualisation of two fundamental concepts: growth and security.

This book was written for a broad readership, for those interested in the contemporary China challenge, as well as an audience of senior policy-makers, diplomats, and business leaders who wish to comprehend China's intent and make critical decisions about dealing with China. When engaging with leading figures from around the world, it became increasingly clear that when it comes to China, what is most useful is deep analysis based on a comprehensive and panoramic view that can make sense of current events. That is why I adopted a cross-disciplinary approach to convey a concise logic, with the intention to create a practical framework that can be readily applied in real-world situations. The downside is that the book is not specifically tailored to China specialists who have devoted the majority of their research to China. In the interest of synthesis and applicability, the book is sure to miss some of the details and fine-tuning that come with a focused perspective. Keen readers will certainly benefit from exploring more in-depth research on the topics most relevant to their concerns—many of which are included in the references throughout this book. I hope the specialists will forgive occasional shorthand or simplifications, and readers will turn to their work for further nuance.

I hope that this book can be a contribution to one of the most important topics of our century. Only together can we find an optimal solution. On that note, I encourage readers to challenge and critique my arguments and engage in intellectual debate, as a way of gaining deeper understanding and suggesting new ways of thinking. I thank you all for your efforts in taking action towards a better collective future.

Melbourne, Australia

Jean Dong

Acknowledgements

The journey of writing this book has been an incredibly fulfilling milestone in my life. Thus, I express these acknowledgements with profound appreciation and humility. I didn't get here just by myself, but with people who believed in me, inspired me and supported me throughout the journey.

My heartfelt gratitude goes to Lindsay Tanner, Malcolm Broomhead, Rowan Callick, Colin Heseltine, Mark Allison, and Uri Dadush, who generously devoted their priceless time to review and critique the manuscript, as well as consistently supported me throughout the process. Their ceaseless inspiration and wisdom, coupled with their invaluable feedback, have tremendously enriched my thought process and fine-tuned my perspectives.

My profound gratitude and appreciation also extend to many distinguished experts who generously shared their time and insights, aiding my understanding of specialised subjects and intricate issues about China. Through thought-provoking intellectual exchanges, insightful comments and stimulating questions, they provided important contributions that have greatly influenced and refined my perspectives. In particular, I wish to convey my sincere appreciation to Wang Gungwu, Zhao Tingyang, Bilahari Kausikan, Peter Drysdale, Kishore Mahbubani, Anthony Milner, Danny Quah, Fu Chengyu, Wang Hui, Wang Yiwei, Kerry Brown, Xue Lan, He Baogang, Andrew Robb, Geoff Raby, Li Mingjiang, and Alicia Garcia-Herrero.

In addition, I would also like to express my deep appreciation to my dear friend, Julien Leyre, whose unwavering and invaluable support has been instrumental throughout this process. Serving as the development editor of this book, he became my trusted sounding board and editorial mentor. His insightful feedback and wisdom at every stage of the editorial process have been pivotal in shaping and enhancing this book. Our collaborative effort, a real-world 'East meets West', fused diverse perspectives and values, leading to an enriched shared vision. This process strengthened my belief in the power of trust, humility, and open-mindedness to bridge differences, inspiring hope for inclusivity on a global scale. I am deeply grateful for this enriching experience and our enduring friendship.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the anonymous reviewers of the book, whose constructive feedback during the peer-review process was greatly appreciated.

As a final note, I would like to make a disclaimer that while all the individuals acknowledged above have provided invaluable support in the completion of this book, it does not imply they agree with or endorse the views and arguments presented herein. Responsibility for any criticism rests solely with me.

Praise for *Chinese Statecraft in a Changing World*

“The use of the ideas of dynamics and constraints makes sense to a historian. I imagine international relations experts will find them useful too.”

—Wang Gungwu, *University Professor, National University of Singapore*

“This excellent book addresses one of the critical geopolitical questions of our age. Is China’s ambition to replace the United States as the dominant power or will it be content to sit as an equal partner on the global stage, and how would the relationship evolve without catastrophic conflict? It provides great insights into the internal systems and thinking of the Chinese leadership both in a historical and current context.”

—Malcolm Broomhead, *Chairman of Orica; Non-Executive Director of BHP Group, 2010–2022*

“This book is worthy of great attention. The author shows deep knowledge and understanding of both China and the Western world, making this book an excellent go-between. Articulating the country’s long history with appreciation for today’s major global challenges, it offers a realistic analysis of what China truly looks like, and how it’s likely to react in different scenarios. This book is critical reading for anyone looking to brush off the noise of polarised arguments, and engage in serious sense-making about China’s deep-rooted past and flexible futures.”

—Zhao Tingyang, *Professor of Philosophy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; Author of All Under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*

“Jean Dong has contributed to the growing literature on elite Chinese politics and economics with an ambitious and intriguing focus on placing contemporary events in the context of ancient and long-standing Chinese trends and traditions. She has succeeded in this while at the same time acknowledging the extent of the ideological shift now under way—one that she suggests may well outlast Xi Jinping—that includes elevating security as a priority. For Xi both vaunts China’s ‘rejuvenation’,

incorporating all that has made the country great in past eras, while also seeking to stress as he did at the 20th National Communist Party Congress that ‘there is no end to theoretical innovation’.”

—Rowan Callick, *Australian Expert and Author on China; Former China Correspondent for The Australian and The Australian Financial Review*

“There is no more crucial question in contemporary international relations than China: the imperatives of its statecraft, its motivations and goals. Too many analyses are ideologically motivated. Jean Dong is a welcome, refreshing and important exception. She offers clear, balanced and realistic insights into China’s global role amidst changes in the international environment of an unprecedented speed and scope. Her work will be invaluable to academics and practitioners alike as they struggle to understand a China that often puzzles but can never be ignored.”

—Bilahari Kausikan, *Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, 2010–2013*

“As a development economist it is impossible for me to have anything but deep respect for China’s epochal achievement in reducing poverty and raising the living standard of a large part of humanity. I have long and hard tried to understand it and found in Jean Dong’s profoundly serious book an invaluable guide and source of insights. You do not have to be a China expert, nor do you have to agree with all of Jean’s scholarly interpretations to recognize the commitment, wisdom and balance that define her work. As a world citizen, I must add: we are living in dangerous times, and Jean’s book—if carefully studied by those charting the course of nations—will surely make us safer.”

—Uri Dadush, *Research Professor, University of Maryland; Non-Resident Fellow, Bruegel*

“Jean Dong’s book offers fundamentally important insights into why China does what it does. Her wide-ranging narrative covers historical and current trends, as well as external and domestic influences. At a time of great global uncertainty, with China at the epicentre, this is an invaluable and necessary contribution. While it is right to focus on China’s growing strength and assertiveness, it is China’s insecurity and vulnerabilities, she notes, that pose a greater risk. And, as she further writes, miscalculations and misjudgements from the West in their interactions with China can lead to undesirable results. This is an essential message to those who present China in one-dimensional and simplistic terms, and should be absorbed by policy makers, strategic analysts and, indeed, the general public, as they seek to comprehend what is one of the world’s greatest challenges.”

—Colin Heseltine, *Australian Ambassador to the Republic of Korea, 2001–2005; Deputy Head of Mission in the Australian Embassy in Beijing, 1982–1985 and 1988–1992*

“In an era of ‘polycrisis’, the ‘China threat’ theory and the ‘China collapse’ theory are like two sides of the same coin, flipping in turn, which to a large extent not only affects public opinion, but even dominates the policy orientation of many countries. Against this background, the author adopts the analytical framework of ‘Dynamic Constraints Analysis’, which integrates long-term historical perspective, broad geographical relationship, complex policy making process and detailed data, and provides a basis for understanding contemporary China and its policy formation process. This novel perspective is important to help avoid misdirection in strategic options driven by the ‘politics of fear’ in addressing the China challenge. This is a timely, inspiring, rare and excellent book.”

—Wang Hui, *Professor of Literature and History, Tsinghua University; Author of The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*

“For a world seeking to deal with the ‘China Challenge’, Jean Dong’s book makes an outstanding contribution towards an informed and balanced understanding of today’s China. It is written to serve as a tool for ‘sense-making, not persuasion’. Jean seeks not to ask the reader to accept China’s political system or values, nor make predictions regarding China’s future actions, but rather, to better understand how geography and the depths of thousands of years of civilisation very materially shape much of the culture, priorities and actions of contemporary China. The results of Jean’s extraordinarily extensive research are fascinating, compelling and scholarly. This book removes ignorance and fosters respect.”

—Andrew Robb, *Australian Minister for Trade and Investment, 2013–2016*

“Here is a book, written in Australia, that gives real depth to public debate. It suggests how geography influences the thinking of a nation and then discusses the key institutions, ideas and priorities that make China distinctive. Writing beautifully for the general reader, Jean shows how present-day China emerges from its past—reminding us time and again that a great deal of understanding, together with a certain calmness, can be gained from historical insights. Few issues matter more for Australia than assessing China’s future, especially its foreign policy intentions. Not everyone will be convinced by Jean’s views—but all will agree that the book should be essential reading.”

—Anthony Milner, *Professorial Fellow, University of Melbourne; Former Basham Professor of Asian History, Australian National University*

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